

The Problems with Reimagining Public Media in the Context of Global South

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Abstract

This paper puts forward a case from the global south into the discussion of public media. It pays particular attention to Bangladesh, an epicenter of a thriving media system in South Asia. From a political economic perspective in this paper I ask: can the state broadcaster BTV be a public media? Based on a combination of methods including in-depth interviews and document analysis, I locate four problematic areas including political instrumentalization, commercialization, struggle for autonomy, and contradictory policy responses – all which impede BTV's ability to perform as a public media. I argue that this inability has to be understood not as a failure of the state but as a result of colonial legacy, post-colonial transformation, as well as a derivative of neoliberal market-orientation of communications in the global South.

Keywords

public media, global South, television journalism, political instrumentalization, Bangladesh

Introduction

Over the past several decades, Public Service Broadcasting (henceforth PSB) has been subject to a combined commercial, political and ideological assault, everywhere in the world and on every front – but “most strikingly in northwest Europe – the heartland of PSB” (Lowe & Steemers, 2012, p. 9). While there is a repeated claim of decline in public service media in line with a misleading claim for the “end of television” (Katz, 1996; 2009), in many European countries, as well as elsewhere (for example, Japan and Korea), PSB is still well entrenched (see Curran, 2002; Jakubowicz, 2007). Such resilience, in the wake of the global financial crisis, merits attention and efforts to defend and revitalize the core strengths of public service media. In fact, the past two decades have witnessed an all-inclusive applied and scholarly turn towards public service media, as the meaning and narrative of both the ‘public service’ and ‘broadcasting’ have been extended, transformed, and renegotiated to readjust to changing circumstances. The reconceptualization of public service brings community broadcasting, grassroots media, civic broadcasting, as well as web-based broadcasting under one broad umbrella term public service media (PSM). A range of comprehensive literature and diverse case studies has been produced by Re-Visionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise (RIPE) in this regard (see, Lowe & Steemers, 2012; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007; Lowe & Jauert, 2005). However, this might not be the case for much of the global South where television is still an emerging media. Given that there is a general lack of fully-fledged PSB in many developing countries; public media scholars pay a little attention to explore the prospect of public media in the contexts of global South.

In recent decades the roles that underpin public service media have continued to evolve. PSB is often equated with public broadcasting (independently owned, financed, and managed by the public, e.g. Pacifica radio in the US) and state broadcasting services (completely owned, controlled, and managed by the state, e.g. CCTV in China). However, an ideal model of PSB implies an autonomous organization that is supported or even owned by the state but controlled and managed as a public corporation and funded by a system of licensing fees or taxes (e.g. CBC in Canada or BBC in the UK). James Curran (2002) notes that PSB does not mean only public broadcasting; a commercial TV out-

let can be a PSB if it complies with state provided regulations and pursue public objectives (e.g. Sweden's TV4 or Finland's MTV). PSB enjoys a greater degree of independence compared to state-controlled public media. Historically, public service broadcasting held monopolies in many Western European countries (Zhao & Hackett, 2005, p. 4), and the state-owned public broadcasting service has often been the dominant one in postcolonial nation-states (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006; Alhassan, 2005). Some insist that a state media is very different from public media (in the contexts of the post-communist and post-apartheid countries), although both categories claim to serve the public (see, Knight, 2013; Petre, 2012). If state broadcaster and PSB share some common characteristics, can a state broadcaster be an effective instance of 'public media'? This paper takes Bangladesh, site of a thriving (but not untroubled) media system in South Asia, to answer to this question. It contextualizes broadcasting in a postcolonial scenario, and then explores the prospects and problems of BTV (Bangladesh Television – a state-owned media organization in operation since 1964) as an example public media in this context.

Public Media in a Postcolonial Context

Efforts to support public media in the context of the Global South are complicated by the legacy of colonial heritage, the postcolonial quest for nation building, and the crosscurrents of commercialization and democratization in the era of globalization (Eko, 2003; Banerjee, & Seneviratne, 2006). In order to understand why state broadcasters in the Global South did not emerge as a full-fledged "public service broadcaster", as in many European countries, we have to see the historic circumstances in which the state broadcasters in many postcolonial nation-states came into being. Public radio broadcasting, for example, was first introduced in Africa and India by the colonial powers primarily "to further their own imperialist interests and policies" as well as "to deliver urgent propaganda" of the British Empire (Alhassan, 2005 ; Agrawal & Raghaviah, 2006). Aginam provides an insight on the consequences of this, worth quoting at length:

"... even though the British made some effort, particularly in the waning years of colonial rule, to bequeath a truly public service system to her colonies... Such efforts were, however, wishful, as the newly independent states in no time turned the semiautonomous broadcasting corporations into government agencies, which left them vulnerable to official manipulation... While some of these broadcasting institutions retained their original designation as corporations, they were in reality no more than official mouthpiece of whichever regime was in power. (Aginam, 2005, p. 125-126)

Indeed, the practice of using media for the interest of the ruling party was not intrinsic to postcolonial regimes and their political systems, but was rather an imperial/colonial legacy that the autocratic governments in the newly independent nation-states began to rejuvenate for the same purposes valued by the former colonial ruler originally: to serve the ruling power. Although the colonial state resisted the seductions of the market and extended the use of radio to include educational and community building aims, some postcolonial states could not resist the influence of marketization forces for in the long run. With the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), liberalization of the airwaves and the rise of private broadcasting in postcolonial Africa and elsewhere, the quest for media democratization have ironically been replaced by new communication policy regimes that valorize the market (Alhassan, 2005).

Bangladesh fits into the larger colonial and postcolonial history of the Indian sub-continent where public broadcasting was born in the colonial era, but later expanded and solidified as a "nationalist project" with elements of linguistic and cultural diversity. Albeit used and manipulated as the "official mouthpiece" of the government, in both postcolonial Africa and India, the public broadcasting system could not survive and expand without the full support and control of the govern-

ment. It was not long ago that state controlled electronic media, such as All India Radio, Radio Pakistan, and later Bangladesh Radio, played a central role in shaping national identity and reinterpreting colonial and pre-colonial histories (Page & Crawley, 2001, p. 26), and government programs related to education, health, family planning, agriculture and other development issues were beamed across thousands of villages (Agrawal & Raghaviah, 2006). However, owing to liberalization, privatization, and globalization of satellite broadcasting, the priority of public broadcasters in India has been gradually shifted from pursuing a public agenda to capitalizing and materializing the public good (Thomas, 2010).

Within this plurality, following the postcolonial tradition, political biases of media have been highly normalized by the political regimes. This impacted the progress of PSB in South Asia to a varied degree. Extensive efforts have been made over the years to transform the giants of India's state broadcasting, Doordarshan and All India Radio, into full PSBs. For instance, with the support of the government, Indian public broadcaster Prasar Bharati Corporation (PBC) and its 213 radio stations and 50 television stations not only survived the colonial hangover but have become the largest radio and television network in the world (Seneviratne, 2006, p. 41). After more than a decade long struggle, Japan Overseas Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Radio Nepal are on the verge of formulating policy and legal provisions to transform Radio Nepal into a PSB. Bhutan Broadcasting Service is on the move towards PSB (Smith, 2012). PSB in South Asia, with its rapidly growing private media system, thus resembles the 'Polarized Pluralist model' sketched by Hallin and Mancini (2004)¹, but may require a fourth model such as "divergent pluralist model" to be adequate, in which there is no one media system but "a complex web of media systems with divergent characteristics" (Thussu & Jain, 2013).

Television in Bangladesh

The history of television in Bangladesh traces back to British colonial era. In 1937, All India Radio (AIR) was born under BBC model of public broadcasting. The colonial legacy was also applied to post-partition Pakistan as a public corporation but within a nationalist framework. BTV was launched in 1964 in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) as a part of Pakistan Television Corporation. Upon independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Awami League government changed the status of BTV from a public corporation into a state broadcaster under the control of Ministry of Information, thus fundamentally altering its direction and operation (Shoesmith, Mahmud, & Reza, 2013, p. 237-238). The monopoly of BTV has been curbed as the government liberalized television industry in 1997.

In recent decades, television in Bangladesh has emerged as a highly influential, extremely popular and even somewhat controversial medium. Defying the global recession, the number of satellite television channels in Bangladesh has rocketed to 43 in less than two decades, yet more than 200 applications remain awaiting a decision regarding licensing (The Daily Star, 2013, November 26). Although the state-owned BTV claims itself as a "Public Broadcasting Station" (PBS), there is no independent public service television in Bangladesh. Despite the growth of cable television, BTV is still the only terrestrial television station that the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis can watch. Currently it has a potential coverage of 93 per cent of the 165 million national population,

¹ Hallin and Mancini identify three ideal media systems: Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model, North/Central Europe or Democratic Corporatist Model, and North Atlantic or Liberal Model. They refer *Polarized pluralism* as a model of liberal democracy in which large number of distinct political parties exists, and inhabits a wide spectrum of political positions. Thussu and Jain (2013) would argue that Indian media does not fall into any categories of Hallin and Mancini (2004) as it is more linguistically diverse and culturally plural than in any Mediterranean countries.

transmitting 17 hours of programming including 14 news bulletins. With a view to reach Bangladeshi diaspora, BTV launched its satellite version - BTV World in 2004.

Political Instrumentalization of BTV

Bangladesh has a history of enduring political intolerance that shatters press freedom (Ahmed, 2009). Bangladesh spent 15 years under military rule and, although democracy was restored in 1990, the political scene remains volatile. The major political issue that threatens to destabilize Bangladesh is political divisiveness, a bitter acrimony and ongoing vendetta between the ruling and opposition parties that often paralyzes parliament, rendering it ineffectual and dysfunctional. Critics even worry that the antagonism between the main parties - the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party - reflects personal animosity between leaders rather than substantial ideological differences (BBC Media Action, 2012, p. 9). As a corollary, this has led to politicization of administration and polarization of journalism along party lines at a huge cost to the public interest (Khan, 2008, p. 102). BTV may serve its audience with relevant public service information, but at the same time it serves the purposes of incumbent governments; the broadcaster is known for its structural and on-air bias towards ruling parties.

Indeed, the news gathering, production, and treatment procedures at BTV manifest nothing if not a comprehensive and systematic publicity effort focused on the activities of the government, and BTV hardly pretends to camouflage this fact. BTV claims that 78% of total programming includes public interest issues; however, a close examination of the 'Daily News Assignment Schedule' (December, 2013) of BTV News section reveals that the majority of news (approximately 52%) were pre-determined based on the political proximity to the government (e.g. covering activities of ministers, secretariats, bureaucrats, ruling party parliament members, party presidiums, party affiliates, and even BTV high-officials themselves). In most cases the presence of (a) political figure(s) or the reference or request of (a) politically important person(s) has tended to be the key impetus behind the production of news.

It was not too long ago, during the military regimes, that General Zia ur Rahman and General Ershad adroitly used television, to showcase their own personalities and the role of the army in national activities. In fact, for much of the 1980s, Bangladesh seemed very much a mirror image of Pakistan, the state from which it had broken away (Page & Crawley, 2001, p. 57-58). Three decades have passed, yet the daily assignment schedules - which show evidence of direct gatekeeping in the pre-production, selection and treatment of news - are enough to induce a sense of *déjà vu* recalling the centralized politicization of media that had begun in the colonial era. It also serves as a confirmation of a political instrumentalization of public media that has been normalized and naturalized in the newsroom through daily routine practice over the course of decades. Democratization of the political system, in this case, did not change the colonial and autocratic political culture that viewed public media as a venue for propaganda, but rather granted the political legitimacy to effect this more systematically, routinely, and efficiently.

Commercialization of State Broadcasting

Critical scholars argue that advertising-based financing or commercialization of media serves as a means of reconstituting class power, with profound political and ideological implications (Zhao, 1998).² In fact, each commercial encroachment erodes the accessible space for participation in pub-

² In the context of China, for example, post-Mao commercialization of state media CCTV did not guarantee independence but rather entrenched the coexistence of political and commercial instrumentalization furthering what Zhao (2012, 1998) terms, a *Propagandist/Commercial* model of journalism. Commercialization of public broadcasting has been already normalized in many parts around the globe, including Europe. For ex-

lic discourse on the part of all of the multiple constituents of ‘the public’ writ large (Artz, 2003, p. 7). This is applicable both to state and private television in Bangladesh. Aiming to compete for revenue with the private television channels, BTV uses its access superiority (because BTV has by far the greatest reach) to charge the highest rate for advertising (up to 90,000 BDT= approx. 1160 USD per minute) during the news, a greater sum than top ranked private television channel ATN Bangla. Interestingly, BTV is at present perhaps the only television channel in the country that does not allow any corporate branding in television news.³ BTV is convinced that such corporate branding serves as a distraction to the reach the audience.⁴ Indeed, BTV has no need to secure corporate branding at the expense of its own symbolic superiority as the only public television network in the country, as it has already gained a profitable and superior position by charging the highest rate of advertising for news – and still attracting the lion’s share of all advertisements.

Such commercial power on the part of a public broadcaster creates hybrid logic of market-state-media that cannot simply be understood in terms of the public/private dichotomy in the context of a single nation-state. Rather, it should be analyzed and situated against the backdrop of global trends towards greater market-orientation of journalism that have emerged as a principal dimension of journalistic culture and practice (Hanitzsch, 2007; McChesney, 2003). Curran, Iyengar, Lund and Salovaara-Moring (2009) found that market-oriented media are less concerned with social and political awareness and problem-solving and less likely to play a meaningful role in informing the public, educating them, and pursuing social development. BTV, being fully funded by public sources, yet profiteering from self-subordination to the market, epitomizes a reinforced ideological contradiction facing public media in the neoliberal era. This does not signal the power of state broadcasters being weakened by global market forces, but rather attests to how a third world state itself works as a mobilizer and patron to integrate public entities into the global “culture-ideology of consumerism” (Sklair, 1994, 2012)⁵. BTV thus renews Jakubowicz’s (2007) critique of public broadcasting, performing as “a pawn on an ideological chessboard,” leaning towards market fundamentalism.

Struggle for Autonomy and Policy Contradiction

Since the restoration of democracy in 1990 through a mass uprising against the autocratic ruler HM Ershad, every successive government has pledged to give autonomy to Betar and BTV. Responding to popular demand, in 1996, the Awami League government constituted a 16-member ‘Commission for Framing Rules and Regulations for the Autonomy of Bangladesh Television’ (Radio-TV Autonomy Commission, aka Asafuddowlah Commission). However, instead of forming a National Broadcasting Commission as recommended by the commission, the Awami League government formed two separate authorities: Bangladesh Betar Authority Act, 2001 and Bangladesh Television Authority Act, 2001. The government retained the commanding height of political control, given that under these draft laws approved by the cabinet, the government can recruit and terminate officials including the chairperson of both BTV and Betar – without giving any reason. The demand for the auton-

ample, more than 70 percent of revenue of public television in Poland and Spain comes from a commercial source. About 45 percent of the revenue comes from advertising in Italy and France (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012, p. 32-33)

³ Corporate branding is a more profitable and all-encompassing marketing technique (branding a television program with the name/logo/slogan/short jingle and/or product/service/image of any sponsoring corporation) that was introduced first by ATN Bangla in 1997, and later adopted and modified by most of the private television channels in Bangladesh (see Rahman, 2009, 2012; Haq, 2011).

⁴ Interview with Gopal Chandra Deb, Chief News Editor, BTV News, December 30, 2013.

⁵ “The culture-ideology of consumerism refers to the transformation of excessively above-subsistence consumption from a sectional practice of the rich throughout human history to a globalizing phenomenon directed at the mass of the population” (Sklair, 2012).

omy of public broadcasting thus has given rise to grave despair for the civil society in Bangladesh.⁶ However, what if BTV itself does not want autonomy? According to a high official of BTV:

As a government employee, now we have more job security than the journalists working in the private television channels. If BTV ever becomes autonomous, like the public universities did, we will lose whatever job security we do have and be still governed by the rulers... The government will appoint the chairman. They will employ their own staffs. This culture will not change with becoming autonomous if we do not change our mentality... The output comes from the social and political structure. We must change these structures first⁷.

More than 30 acts have either direct or indirect bearing on the installation, operations or broadcasting of audio-visual media, including BTV and Bangladesh Betar (Reza, 2012). Yet these laws are not fully suited to meet the need of public service broadcasting in Bangladesh. The most recent draft of the National Broadcast Policy (2013) grants Ministry of Information full power and authority to decide the fate of state media until (which is not specified in the draft) an independent national broadcasting commission can be created. Thus, Bangladesh goes back to the square one of creating broadcast commissions, which barely has worked in the past.

Efforts for public service

There is an absence of subaltern counter-publics in the broadcast media in Bangladesh. The news production processes are structurally unsympathetic to the grassroots. Private TV channels pay rare attention to aboriginal ethnicities and religious minorities, such as Hindus. The religion Islam works as a by-default-political-determinant for the TV channels as their majority target audience is Muslim. In this backdrop, BTV is the only channel that has a mandate to broadcast programs for the religious minority and aboriginal population.⁸ There is evidence that television news, notwithstanding its market-orientation, is being perceived as credible for its social role and problem-solving stance (Andaleeb et al., 2012), which overlaps with the characteristics of public journalism. The state broadcasters Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar (state radio) are particularly recognized for their developmental role by some researchers, notably in public health, agricultural sectors, and climate change issues (Hasan & Baten, 2005; Islam & Hasan, 2000; Rahman, 2010). With the arrival of community radio and digital multiplatform initiatives in Bangladesh (most notably, Access to Information Project under Digital Bangladesh initiatives by the government and BBC Media Action online-mobile-broadcast initiatives), BTV now faces a pressure to revive its public imperatives. The digitization of terrestrial television BTV, similar to the problems faced by Prasar Bharati in India, may pose further challenge as a vast portion of the rural population, who are living below the poverty line, will not be able to afford the STBs device required to access the digital terrestrial television. Given these circumstances, a potential integrated broadcasting policy should be able to address the challenge and opportunities of new media and technological switchovers. A comprehensive policy should be undertaken that will provide guidelines on operational aspects of traditional broadcasting as well as for new systems of broadcasting.

Conclusion

⁶ For a detailed discussion on this matter, along with a brief political history of television, and policy limitations see, Shoesmith, Mahmud, and Reza (2013).

⁷ Interview with Gopal Chandra Deb, Chief News Editor, BTV News, December 30, 2013.

⁸ Interview with Abdullah Al Malun, Producer, News, BTV News, December 30, 2013.

The key findings of the paper suggest that there are several core problems with the existing structures and processes of governing state media that hinder its potentials to be an effective public media. The reasons can be summarized as follows. First, despite its terrestrial superiority the trends of politicization of state broadcaster BTV as a postcolonial legacy pose an obstacle for political pluralism. Second, the increasing commercialization of television programs replaces its public value in exchange for market value, which cripples its role for the publics it sets out to serve. Third, BTV's reluctance for gaining autonomy from the government while maintaining an exploitative hierarchal structure shows BTV's internal contradiction to serve the public. Fourth, extant policy regimes are not suited for democratic governance, which blocks the potential of an effective public service television broadcaster to emerge in Bangladesh. However, despite all the problems BTV faces, it is still able to create awareness on public health, agricultural sectors, and climate change issues and can preserve some minority representation. Therefore, the incapacity of BTV to perform as a fully-fledged instance of effective public media should be not seen as a failure of the state but as a result of colonial legacy, post-colonial transformation, as well as a derivative of neoliberal market-orientation of communications in the global South.

It took more than a century for the developed nation-states to build an infrastructure and supportive conditions to accommodate public media and yet they are not free of problems. Understandably, it would be more difficult for the developing countries to embrace the public service ethos and values since they have to simultaneously strive for a culture of political tolerance and public participation through economic and social justice. Therefore, in order to make the existing state media initiatives fully functional and as effective as public media, media reform activism in Bangladesh has to be situated in line with the broader movement for progressive social change.

Acknowledgment

This paper stems from a doctoral research in progress; therefore it does not claim to be complete and conclusive. A broader version of this paper has been accepted for a presentation at the RIPE@2014 Conference, Tokyo, Japan, and August 28, 2014. The author would like to thank Stream Special Issue Editor Mike Mowbray for his suggestions for revision. Also, thanks to Professor Yuezhi Zhao and Professor Robert Hackett in the School of Communication for their valuable suggestions to enrich the literature sources.

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